

Message Text

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FM AMEMBASSY SINGAPORE

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 5807

INFO AMEMBASSY BANGKOK

AMEMBASSY KUALA LUMPUR

AMCONSUL SONGKHLA

USMISSION GENEVA

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E.O. 11652: N/A

TAGS: SREF, SN

SUBJ: INDOCHINESE REFUGEES, BOAT CASES - UNWILLINGNESS OF
SHIPS TO BOARD REFUGEES

REF: SINGAPORE 2826

1. EMBASSY HAS RECEIVED RELIABLE REPORT FROM U.S. FIRM OPERATING RIG SUPPLY VESSELS IN GULF OF THAILAND THAT ITS SHIPS HAVE COME ACROSS REFUGEE BOATS THERE ON THREE OR FOUR OCCASIONS IN LAST MONTH. THESE ARE GENERALLY SMALL (60FT.) MOTORIZED FISHING BOATS, OF HIGHLY QUESTIONABLE SEAWORTHINESS. CAPTAINS OF RIG SUPPLY VESSELS HAVE ON OCCASION GIVEN FOOD, FUEL, WATER AND MEDICAL ASSISTANCE TO THE REFUGEES. THEY HAVE NOT, HOWEVER, ALLOWED REFUGEES TO BOARD THEIR SHIPS, EVEN THOUGH IN SOME CASES REFUGEES INCLUDED ILL WOMEN AND CHILDREN, AND ABILITY OF REFUGEE CRAFT TO REACH SHORE MAY HAVE BEEN DEBATE-
ABLE.

2. POLICY OF SHIP CAPTAINS IS TO PICK UP REFUGEES ONLY IF LOSS OF LIFE IS CLEARLY IMMINENT. CAPTAINS ARE AWARE THAT NO COUNTRY IN REGION WILLING TO ACCEPT REFUGEES, AND HAVING THEM ON BOARD WILL RESULT IN LONG DELAYS IN EITHER ENTERING OR DEPARTING
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PORTS, WITH CONSEQUENT FINANCIAL LOSS TO SHIP OWNERS. FURTHER-

MORE, PANAMA, WHOSE FLAG OF CONVENIENCE MOST OF THESE OIL INDUSTRY VESSELS FLY, TAKES NO RESPONSIBILITY FOR REFUGEES.

3. IN ADDITION, REFUGEE VESSELS HAVE APPROACHED BRITISH PETROLEUM'S OIL RIG "TAINARON" FOR ASSISTANCE. THE TAINARON IS WORKING IN THE GULF DIRECTLY ON THE ROUTE OF REFUGEES FROM VIETNAM TO THAILAND, AND STANDS OUT ON THE HORIZON. EMBASSY UNDERSTANDS THAT THIS RIG'S POLICY IS TO REFUSE ANY ASSISTANCE WHATSOEVER TO REFUGEES (WE HAVE ONE UNCONFIRMED REPORT THAT REFUGEES APPROACHING RIG HAVE BEEN DRIVEN OFF WITH FIRE HOSES). UNOCAL'S WODECO SIX RIG ALSO OPERATING IN GULF, BUT WE HAVE NO KNOWLEDGE OF REFUGEES APPROACHING THIS RIG.

4. PRESENT CIRCUMSTANCES (RELUCTANCE OF SE ASEAN GOVERNMENTS AND CONSEQUENTLY OF SHIPS' MASTERS TO PICK UP REFUGEES) WOULD APPEAR TO CONSIDERABLY HEIGHTEN DANGER OF REFUGEES LOSING LIVES AT SEA. INDEED, IT IS POSSIBLE SUCH LOSS HAS ALREADY OCCURRED.

5. SUCH A SITUATION OBVIOUSLY FRAUGHT WITH HUMANITARIAN AND PUBLIC RELATIONS IMPLICATIONS. WHILE HUMANITARIAN CONSIDERATIONS ARE PARAMOUNT, STORIES ON REFUGEES AND THEIR PLIGHT STAND TO RECEIVE INCREASINGLY GREATER PRESS COVERAGE WITH U.S. LIKELY TO BE SINGLED OUT FOR CRITICISM. FOREGOING SUGGESTS THAT DEPARTMENT SHOULD GIVE SERIOUS CONSIDERATION ON URGENT BASIS TO A MORE EXPEDITIOUS AND OPEN PAROLE SYSTEM. HOLDRIDGE

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